

Guest Editorial

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Higher standards: The right direction for students

By Tony Evers, State Superintendent of Public Instruction

What does it mean to be a high school graduate? In Wisconsin, through Agenda 2017, it is our goal for every student to graduate with the knowledge and skills needed for college and career. That means graduates are ready for on-the-job training, an apprenticeship, or coursework at a college or university. To earn a high school diploma means a graduate is ready to be successful at the next steps of life.

Starting with the end result — graduates who are college and career ready — we tackled the job of increasing the rigor of Wisconsin's 1998 Model Academic Standards. We brought together leaders from business, commerce, workforce, and higher education to tell us what they expected from our graduates. As a result, Wisconsin's new standards for mathematics, English language arts, and literacy are higher than our old standards and are more focused, providing guidelines for what students should know and be able to do at every grade level.

The concept of having common expectations for public education is the right direction for our students. For children with parents in the military, it brings consistency when families are transferred to another base or across the country. In communities that experience lots of mobility, it's a blessing. Why would learning to add, compute the area of a rectangle, or write a persuasive essay be different or at different grade levels in Fond du Lac or Hudson, Wisconsin or Kentucky? For colleges and universities, it means more students earning college credits right away rather than needing remedial coursework. And with common standards, businesses know what to expect from any Wisconsin high school graduate.

Just to be clear, standards delineate what schools and teachers teach, not how they teach it. State standards provide guidance for state assessments that impact school and district accountability. Wisconsin's locally elected school boards are responsible for adopting academic standards to fit local needs. Additionally curriculum, textbook selection, lesson plans — those are still the purview of local communities and educators.

The vast majority of Wisconsin public schools have embraced the higher standards. A survey last spring of certified teachers found that 45 percent of respondents began working right away on Wisconsin's standards for

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mathematics, English language arts, and literacy. Another 36 percent have been moving toward the new standards since they were adopted in 2010. Teachers say they are ready to teach the higher standards, and they believe their colleagues are ready too. Overall, they agree that the standards are good for Wisconsin students.

JoAnn Lens, an educator from Milwaukee, said new standards are making her kids dive further into their thinking, ask more questions, and want to learn more. Terry Kaldhusdal, a sixth-grade teacher in the Kettle Moraine School District, says the new standards have changed the way he teaches, a change that has had a profound impact on his student's learning. "It has changed their motivation, their conversations, and their understanding." Faculty from public and private colleges and universities throughout the state support Wisconsin's higher standards to reverse a trend of too many incoming students needing remedial education in mathematics. Wisconsin's higher standards strike the right balance. They are "already far higher than our previous state standards, but not beyond what one can expect from a majority of students."

From teachers and parents to business and education leaders, the desire for higher expectations for our students is strong. We want our graduates to be college and career ready. The state-adopted standards for mathematics, English language arts, and literacy are a foundation for success for all students.

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NOTES: A high resolution photo of the state superintendent is available on the Department of Public Instruction "Media Contacts and Resources" webpage at http://news.dpi.wi.gov/eis_vm-media. This editorial is available electronically at http://news.dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/eis/pdf/dpinr2014_125.pdf.